

The Wildlife Services agency has had more than its share of controversy since the federal program was created nearly a century ago to oversee the trapping, shooting and poisoning of coyotes and other predators for the nation's farmers and ranchers.

A hard-hitting report three decades ago — commissioned by Rogers Morton, secretary of the interior in the Nixon administration — criticized the program for its “built-in resistance to change.” The report warned that a new direction would “require substantial, even drastic, changes in control personnel and control methods, supported by new legislation, administrative changes and methods of financing.”

Apparently, little has changed at the agency, which is little more than a blip on the very large screen that is the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

A recent investigative series by The Sacramento Bee newspaper raised the familiar concerns — and a host of new ones. And it reported that the agency's predator-control practices are “indiscriminate, at odds with science, inhumane and sometimes illegal.”

The newspaper reported that the agency intentionally killed more than 2 million native predators, including close to 1 million coyotes, between 2000 and 2010. During the same period, tens of thousands of non-target animals, ranging from river otters to pet dogs, were killed needlessly because of the agency's nonselective control methods.

Despite reports of wasteful spending and harm to wildlife and ecosystems, the agency has received little scrutiny. For decades, it has been determinedly secretive about its practices and spending.

Now, U.S. Reps. Peter DeFazio, D-Ore., and **John Campbell**, R-Calif., are calling for an investigation of the agency, citing photos of animal abuse that were posted recently on the Internet by an agency employee.

“We are gravely concerned that (the) photographs ... do not represent an isolated occurrence, but may reflect a deep-rooted problem within the Wildlife Services program,” the congressmen wrote in a Nov. 30 letter requesting an investigation by the U.S. Office of Inspector General.

Six months ago, DeFazio and **Campbell** called for a congressional oversight hearing to look into allegations, raised by The Sacramento Bee and nonprofit groups, that the agency indiscriminately and inhumanely targets wildlife and that its practices lack a scientific foundation.

Despite demands by the Humane Society of the United States and other organizations for a “top-to-bottom review” by Agriculture Secretary Thomas Vilsack, problems at the agency remain unaddressed.

The Department of Agriculture this week announced the appointment of 15 members to an advisory committee that will advise the department on the activities and policies of Wildlife Services. The body includes animal welfare, wildlife and agricultural interests; it represents a long-overdue first step toward providing the scrutiny that the program has needed.

But more is necessary. The House Oversight and Government Reform Committee should heed DeFazio’s and **Campbell’s** calls for review and investigate not only the photos of animal abuse, but also the agency’s overall operations and spending, and its questionable predator control methods.

The Wildlife Services program needs a thorough, unflinching review and the rigorous oversight necessary to ensure that it is on the right track.